

## EPA administrator tours San Jacinto River Waste Pits site

By DAVID TAYLOR | Posted: Saturday, March 2, 2013 12:00 pm

Harris County Attorney Vince Ryan welcomed Ron Curry, the new Regional Administrator for the Environmental Protection Agency and EPA EPA Director of Office of External Affairs David Gray during a visit at the County Attorney's Office on February 26.

"The purpose of the visit was to continue the relationship our office has had with Al Armendariz," the previous EPA Region 6 administrator, said Rock Owens with the Harris County Attorney's office.

Owens said Armendariz "was very helpful in getting this superfund process going. It's a minefield with a lot of blame and expense in the situation."

Armendariz resigned last year after a video surfaced of him at a meeting in May 2010 making controversial statements about heavy-handed tactics by the EPA.

Curry, his successor, oversees Texas, Oklahoma, Arkansas, Louisiana and New Mexico.

Early on Tuesday, Ryan joined Curry in an inspection of the San Jacinto River Waste Pits Superfund site, the largest source of the major pollutant dioxin in the San Jacinto River. Ryan and Curry discussed the importance of removing dioxin from the river which is currently under a fish consumption ban because of the pollutant.

In addition, the site is the subject of a pollution suit filed by Harris County seeking \$1 billion in civil penalties from International Paper Company, et. al that polluted the river. In 2010, the EPA ordered the polluters to take temporary measures to halt the spread of the pollution and the EPA is expected to have a final report on the clean-up completed later this year. Curry pledged to continue working with the County on the clean-up.

According to Owens, Curry took it upon himself to fly over the area from the air with the U.S. Coast Guard approximately two weeks ago.

"He wanted a closeup view of how it was impacting the area so we showed him the TCRA [Time-Critical Removal Action] submitted by a consultant."

Basically, the plan was to cover the area with a plastic membrane and then pile up a bunch of rocks on top to prevent the leakage.

"We discussed with him the issues of continued leakage and the EPA has invited the Army Corps of Engineers in to provide a remedy," Owens said.

“We want it removed from the site entirely,” Owens said.

The administrator looked at it, stood on top of the area, asked questions, saw the proximity to the river, neighborhoods, fishing banks, which is important on how it impacts a community, Owens said.

The billion dollars the Harris County Attorney’s office is seeking has intent for the plaintiffs.

“This is for items not covered by the EPA funds,” Owens said including money to pay back the county for funds expended, fish consumption advisories, improved patrolling by Parks and Wildlife and more.

The trial is set for January 2014 in District Court No. 295, Judge Caroline Baker presiding.

Two other lawsuits have been filed, one by a group of fishermen for lost income and exposure to the dioxins, and a group of property owners allege their wells have been contaminated.

According to Owens, contamination could extend as far back as the Lake Houston dam down through the Galveston Bay outlet.